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"Repetition of what thou hast marred": Language and Ritual in *Richard III*

Language in the plays of William Shakespeare is typically presented in a way, with such wit, originality, intensity, and emotion, and by characters that seem to recognize the importance of every verse, that words become a theme unto themselves. If this is not the case in *Richard III*, then, at the least, the fixation on language serves to characterize the speakers and develop the major issues of the text. Richard's oratorical skill stands clearly above and apart from that of others, from the first scene that develops his discourse as one not governed by the same concerns. The preface to the Norton version of *Richard III* distinguishes between Richard's "disruptive mockery and unceremonious violence" and the "elaborate expressions of grief and anger" structured by "an atmosphere of ritual" that haunt the rest of the play (Greenblatt 509). John Jowett, writing for the Oxford edition, makes a similar claim: "The web of rhetoric in *Richard III* effectively suggests a world in which events, as much as language, are locked into patterns of grim inevitability…At the other extreme are the wit, irony, irreverence and aggression of Richard's speech" (26). These traits of Richard's linguistic prowess appear antithetical to the theme of cyclicity in history as manifested in the language of other characters through conventional speeches, redundant images, repetition of words, and in the perception of events. Despite the incongruous mood he projects, Richard acts as the force, but not the intelligence, behind the events that foster this need for repetition by others.

Only to the audience does Richard speak with any amount of candor, and it is in the opening scene and soliloquy that the four terms set out by Jowett seem particularly apt. The play begins with a pun on "son" (1.1.2), establishing a precedent early for Richard's tendency to "moralize two meanings in one word" (3.1.83). With the grave assonance of "clouds", "loured", "our" and "house" (1.1.3), Richard tells of a country divided by battle, then undermines the ferocity of "Grim-visaged war" (1.1.9) by mockingly transforming the figure into one of playful lust: "He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber / To the lascivious pleasing of a lute" (1.1.12-13). This begins a comparison between himself and war, and by extension, the rest of England that once embodied this bloodshed, but has also turned to "delightful measures" (1.1.8). Unlike war or the repeated "Our" (1.1.6-8), Richard has "no delight" – neither sex nor violence - "to pass away the time" (1.1.25). While "one of Richard's striking characteristics is his ability to make evil seem good" (Donawerth 112), he simultaneously makes good seem foolish and cowardly through his irreverence for "this weak-piping time of peace" (1.1.24). After a string of veiled insults about the reigning king and queen, the scene concludes with a promise from Richard that his brother will "be packed with post-haste up to heaven" (1.1.146), coupling the swift and callous murder of Clarence with the light-hearted analogy of express mail. Richard himself "capers on the slick surface of language" (McDonald, "Tropes" 469) proving his innate capacity to fulfill Jowett's description of the villain.

Though it is generally recognized that Richard's cleverness begins to decline after he achieves his ambitions, he gives the audience and his troops one final reminder of his past energy in a speech that parallels a comparatively bland address by Richmond that

"disrupts the rhetorical dynamic to which Shakespeare has accustomed the audience" (McDonald, "Tropes" 476). Richmond uses conventional themes, telling his men of the justness of their cause with antistrophe of their fight against "God's enemy" (5.5.206-207) and redundant use of "blood" (5.6.200-201), "tyrant" (5.6.200, 209-210), and "children" (5.6.215-216). While Richmond applies the standard metaphor of Richard as a jewel set in "England's chair" (5.6.205), Richard finds a more vibrant image for his opponents: "A scum of Bretons and base lackey peasants, / Whom their o'ercloyèd country vomits forth / To desperate ventures and assured destruction" (5.7.47-49). Employing a series of if/then statements, with one line per item, Richmond structures the benefits of victory for his men (McDonald, "Tropes" 476). The same threat of having the enemy "distrain" and "distain" (5.7.52) their land, wives, and children is made explicit in Richard's version of the speech through concise and powerful rhetorical questions: "Shall these enjoy our lands? Lie with our wives? / Ravish our daughters?" (5.7.66-67). Richard's attempt to inspire fear in his soldiers, of himself and of falling to their weak, "paltry" (5.7.53) enemy, is more compelling for the audience than Richmond's ordinary righteousness. Though, as Russ McDonald quips, "the historical victor is a rhetorical loser" ("Tropes" 466), Richard's usurpation is necessary to complete the cycle of violence that he reinitiated and bring to a close to circulating prophecies.

Two notable images recur throughout the play in relation to Richard, as characters find themselves reflexively issuing prayers to God, and listing phrases "in their search for epithets sufficiently monstrous to describe Richard" (McDonald, "Tropes" 466). This stacking of synonyms is most notable in Margaret's speech, and while it "questions the adequacy of language to define the nature of human suffering and the capacities of evil"

(McDonald, *Arts* 40), it also recalls the air of incantation that surrounds the patterns in the curses and laments of the play. Richard is described frequently as a "dog" (1.3.213, 287), a "wolf" (4.4.23), and a "hell-hound" (4.4.48) by the women of the play, as though by finding an appropriate metaphor for his viciousness, they will have some control over or understanding of his role in the deaths surrounding them. Margaret wishes to "live and say, 'The dog is dead'" (4.4.78); however, these lines are given not to an obsolete voice from the macabre past, but to Richmond as the harbinger of a new era of lasting peace: "The bloody dog is dead" (5.8.2). Similarly, a number of characters including Clarence's son, the citizens of act 2 scene 3, the vision of Warwick in Clarence's dream, and even Richard himself all cry out for divine justice or action from God. "God will revenge it" (2.1.140) and "But leave it all to God" (2.3.45) are common consolations for the state of bloodshed and immorality prevalent. When, for example, King Edward fears the wrath of God "will take hold / On me – and you, and mine, and yours, for this" (2.1.132-133), or Buckingham demands that "God punish me" (2.1.34) for treason, it is Richard that answers these prayers and fears, and acts as "the energetic force behind the cycle of destruction" (Hammersmith 32). Though his string of murders is seen the work of "hell's black intelligencer" (4.4.71), the evil originates in the constant cries for retribution.

Repetition in speech is more easily recognizable in the mourning orchestrated by Margaret, where names, deaths, and titles overlap to illustrate the cyclical fates of the monarchy. Margaret states her purpose as "But repetition of what thou hast marred" (1.3.165), and while she recounts and revives past crimes, she does quite literally repeat her accusations, in part because of her obsessive and haunting reappearance, but also because the events she recalls mirror the present: "Edward thy son, that is now Prince of

Wales, / For Edward my son, that was Prince of Wales…Thyself, a queen, for me that was a queen, / Outlive thy glory like my wretched self" (1.3.196-200). The sensation of the women performing sinister rites by evoking history is created by placing the multiplicity of sins "in a world that contains two Richards, two Hastings, two Margarets, two Surreys (one human and one equine), four Edwards, and, if the five decoys are included, six Richmonds" (McDonald, "Tropes" 474). Numerous exchanges contain the repetition, anaphora, antistrophe, polyptoton, and other devices to achieve this mood of both lament and ritual, but one example can encapsulate the overarching effect of these passages:

> *Queen Margaret:* I had an Edward, till a Richard killed him;
> I had a husband, till a Richard killed him.
> Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard killed him;
> Thou hadst a Richard, till a Richard killed him.
> *Duchess of York:* I had a Richard too, and thou didst kill him;
> I had a Rutland too, thou holpst to kill him.
> *Queen Margaret:* Thou hadst a Clarence too, and Richard killed him.
> (4.4.40-46)

"Tell o'er your woes again by viewing mine" (4.4.39), says Margaret, as though all the deaths are so alike, and because the sheer multitude of murders causes them to blur into each other, that recalling any single loss will be akin to grieving for all the deceased.

The prophetic vision of Clarence contains elements that speak to the theme of cyclicity and inevitability in history, even beside the apparent fact that the foretelling of the dream will be realized. Leaving the tower in London on his imagined boat, Clarence "looked toward England, / and cited up a thousand heavy times…that had befallen us" (1.4.13-16). Just as Margaret and the Yorkist women, he remembers the past violence of the wars and is very near to leaving them behind, but is drawn back into the cycle by aiding Richard who, feigning vulnerability, pushes him to his death. The "reflecting

gems, / Which wooed the slimy bottom of the deep / And mocked the dead bones" (1.4.31-33) seem to represent the ephemerality of life and the vanity of value placed on wealth. The image also serves to evoke the lines of kings who have passed, the ones who would have possessed "Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels" (1.4.27) and, like Richard and his recent predecessors, sought the power and wealth depicted as transient and hollow. Brackenbury later expands on this, asserting that other than their short-lived titles, fame, and wealth, the princes caught within these cycles of history are no different than ordinary men: "So that, between their titles and low name, / There's nothing differs but the outward fame" (1.4.78-79). Clarence's vision of Edward as "a shadow like an angel, with bright hair, / dabbled in blood" is paradoxical. The description merges light and dark in an innocent figure stained with blood that could as easily be his own as it could be indicative of guilt in the murder of another party. Warwick's cry for a "scourge for perjury" (1.4.50), and Edward's for the services of the furies associate them with the death of Clarence as much as Richard, the scourge that carries out their desire for further reprisal through violence.

Richard shoulders the blame for the on-stage violence of the play, but the entire "dark monarchy" (1.4.51) is implicated in the guilt for perpetuating "the ritual of history, the swelling chorus of a more-than-human force" (Hammersmith 29) where deaths bring laments and curses, which in turn breed further deaths. Margaret, who is responsible for the majority of successful curses in the text, is herself anathematized by Richard's "noble father" (1.3.171). Jowett's irreverent Richard reappears to mock and disrespect the curses of Margaret, interjecting her name at the end of her execration in a childish attempt to reverse the curse back onto her. The overlapping of deaths continues further with the

execution of Rivers, Gray, and Vaughn who are killed at Pomfret where "Richard the Second here was hacked to death", their blood adding to "thy dismal seat" (3.3.11-12) – another location, just as the Tower of London, transmuted to a place of ceremony and sacrifice by coincidence in events. While the men of the play face their deaths at the hands of Richard fulfilling the curses and prophecies intended for God, the women have a succession of their own: "O thou, well skilled in curses, stay a while, / And teach me how to curse mine enemies" (4.4.116-117). Rather than passing on the kingship, Margaret endows Elizabeth with the title of "queen of sad mischance" (4.4.114), relinquishing the position of bane to Richard and speaker of sorrows. The echoing of sins and transfer of stations would continue on indefinitely, but by the close of the play "the murderous cycle must be broken, but the only one left to break it from within is Richard himself" (Hammersmith, 34). Though linguistically, Richard remains distinct from those caught in the repetition of words, curses, and events, he completes the cycles of the War of the Roses by, ironically, fulfilling the prophecy of his fall.

Under the heading "Linguistic Idealism", Russ McDonald offers a warning to fellow critics:

> "A serious occupational hazard for some Shakespeare scholars is the temptation to believe that every play…is mainly *about* language. Most playgoers leave the theatre thinking that *Richard III* is about a charismatic killer who usurps the throne, not a demonstration of the satisfactions of anaphora and other rhetorical patterns." (*Arts* 165)

Jowett's assessment and division of the types of language found in *Richard III* leave room for much more than analysis of antistrophe. The "patterns of grim inevitability" (Jowett 26) become most valuable in connection with the major theme of cycles of

history, with Richard as the representative from heaven or hell destined to propel the inter-family brutality by requests made through curses.

Works Cited

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